

“What’s So Frightening About Easter?”

Psalm 16/ Acts 2: 22-36

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March 23, 2008

“Easter Sunday sermons” need to be as “short” and “to-the-point” as possible. So “here goes.” Before I “**answer the question** today’s sermon **asks**,” however, here are (at least) “**three important things**” **informed** Christians “should know” **about** “Easter.”

1. The annual **quasi** “religious-cultural event” called “Easter”: **it comes--not from** “the New Testament”—but is, **rather**, a blending of “Christian” and “**pagan** traditions” from “the Middle” (if not the “**Dark Ages**”) of “**western civilization**” (in **general**) and “Europe” (in **particular**).

As to whether the “the **dog**” (the resurrection of **Jesus**, the “birth” of “Christian faith”); whether “the **dog** wags the **tail**” (that of a “**pagan** culture”; new clothes, colored eggs, bunny rabbits, pretty flowers, and the “birth of **Spring**”)—or “vice-versa”—(the “tail wags the **dog**”; how the “culture” defines our “faith” as Christians)—**that is debatable**. As has “**been the case**” **throughout** “Christian history.”

2. As “Christians”—the “Easter **we** celebrate”—it is the “resurrection **of our Lord**” (**Jesus**, the Christ). And we “celebrate it”—not “annually”—but “weekly.” Or as “the Book of Acts” says it: “On the **first day** of the week (**Sunday**), when we (**Christians**) were **gathered together to break bread . . .**” In “the church”—**Easter** is “**every Sunday**.”

Because (#3): there is “no Christian faith” **apart from** “the resurrection **of Jesus**” **on** “the first day of the week” (**Sunday**; what “we Christians” call “the **Lord’s Day**”). Apart from “the resurrection **of our Lord**” there is no “church”—and **subsequently**—no “New Testament.” Indeed, the “resurrection **of Jesus**”—it is to the “**New Testament**”—what “the **Exodus**” is to (what “we Christians” call) the “**Old Testament**”: it’s “where it all **begins**.”

If you were to “ask an ancient **Israelite**,” for instance—“Who is **God**?”—his “**simplest answer**” would be: “God is who **delivered us from slavery in Egypt**.” Just as—for “a **Christian**”—the most “fundamental answer” to “the question”: “Who is God?” It is: “**God is who raised Jesus, from death, back to life.**”

Just as “everything in the **Old Testament**” is “written” **looking back thru** “the **Exodus**”—“everything in the **New Testament**” is “written” **looking back thru** “the **resurrection of Jesus**.” In **other words**—the **Bible**—it is “written” **backwards**.

Now--to “the question”—this “sermon today” asks: “What Is So **Frightening** About Easter?”

I “say it” that way **because** that is how **the Bible** “says it.” Beginning with the “the Gospel of **Mark**” (the “**primary** Gospel” in the New Testament). In the most

“ancient manuscripts” **of** Mark, in fact, the Gospel actually “ends” with **three** of Jesus’ “**women Disciples**,” the Bible says: they “**fled from** the tomb (where Jesus was “buried”); for “**trembling and astonishment** had come **upon them**. And they **said nothing to anyone**,” we’re told--“for they were **afraid**.”

The “resurrection accounts” in **Matthew** and **Luke** are both “similar” **to**, as well as “different” **from** that of **Mark**. “Similar,” at least, in that “the women” in “**these stories**”—they are **also** characterized by “fear”—upon “realizing” that Jesus **has been resurrected.**”

The “Gospel of **John**” ends in “a way” rather “different” from the “**first three Gospels**"; yet, in its “**own way**” there **remains** (even in “**John’s Gospel**”)—there **remains** this “element” of “fear.” For in “the **last chapter**” (**John 21**) Jesus “appears”—following his “resurrection”—he “appears **to his Disciples**” a “**third time**” (the Bible says). And even though they “know it **is** Jesus,” we’re **told**: “[Yet] **none** of the Disciples **dared ask him**, ‘Who **are** you?’”

That “sounds like” one of “those questions” we’ve **all** “wanted to ask” (at “**sometime** or other” in our lives); but have been “afraid” to “**ask it**”—“afraid” of “the **answer**” (?).

“What **Is** So Frightening About Easter?”

It “depends,” it would seem, on what you “believe Easter **is**.”

If it merely involves the “**pagan mythology**” of “**nature** worship,” its “**fertility rites**,” and the “cycle of the **seasons**”—**that** wouldn’t seem to be very “frightening.” Since “Easter”—for a thorough-going “pantheist,” a “druid,” or a “wiccan,” for instance—“Easter” isn’t even about the “**violence** of nature” (its “floods” and “hurricanes” and “tornadoes”). It is, **rather**, about “nature” at its “kindest” and most “gentle”: the “awakening” of “Spring”; the “re-birth” of “beauty” and “new **life**,” following the “death” and “darkness” of “Winter.”

Nor would “Easter” likely evoke “fear” for a “Greek **Platonist**; for whom “death” merely “releases” the “immortal **soul**” (in all its “purity”) from the (**less than pure**) “**con**-straints” and “**re**-straints” of “the body.” That is **not**, however, what “the **Bible**” says “Easter is.” Even though there are many “Christians” who seem to “believe” **otherwise**. Unlike **Socrates**—for whom the “**taking** of his **own life**” was considered a “**glorious** thing”—when “Jesus’ friend, **Lazarus**,” died: “the **Bible says** that **Jesus wept**.”

If “Easter” is but the “resuscitation” of a “corpse”—**that** might be pretty “scary.” But **again**—**that is not**, at least--how “the **Bible** speaks of Easter.” **Rather**, in **the Bible** “Easter” is the “celebration” of **Jesus’ resurrection**—**not** his “resuscitation.” For indeed, it is the “resurrected **Christ**” the “**Disciples meet**” in **Matthew 28**, for instance (where he instructs them to “**go and make Disciples of all nations; baptizing them—in the name of**

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit--**teaching** them," he declares, "**all** that I have **commanded** you"); it is the "resurrected **Christ**" the "Disciples meet," as well, in **Luke 24** (where he "teaches them **the Bible**" and "shares **communion**" with them); and in **John 20** and **21** (where **Jesus**; again, **as** the "resurrected **Christ**"; where he tells a "weeping" **Mary Magdalene**" to **not** "touch him"; while instructing **Thomas**, the "doubter," **to** "touch him"; where he "cooks breakfast" **for** "his Disciples," and "declares" to **Peter**: "Feed my sheep."

Indeed, in **the Bible** "resurrection" is "**re-cre-ation**." That **is**, at least, how **Paul** "explains it" (in **I Corinthians 15**), where he speaks of a "resurrected **body**"--not a "spirit"--but a new "spiritual **body**." As to "what that will **be**"--**for us** (as **Christians**, in "**our** resurrection," the "resurrection" promised **to us**, "in **Christ**")--**the Bible** "doesn't say." Paul "likens it" to the "similarity" **and** "difference" (the "continuity" and "**dis-**continuity," if you will) between a "seed" and a "plant." That **is**, afterall, the "Jesus **Paul** knew"--who so "transformed" **his** life--the "resurrected **Christ**"; the "Jesus" (in the "examples" I've just "cited") whom "the **Disciples** meet" **in** "the Gospels" of Matthew, Luke, **and** John (following "**his** resurrection").

So why would it be "frightening"--in the way those "**first** Disciples are described" (**in** "the Bible")--as "**being** frightened"? What's so "frightening" about "what the **Bible** says," what "**we Christians** believe **Easter** is"?

It's surely not about "going to heaven" when we "die." As "**Christian cliche's**" go--I can't imagine **anything** more "comforting." **Unless**--what "**the Bible** says Easter is"--unless it's something "different." That **is**, at least, what "the Gospels" **seem** to be saying: that in the "resurrection of **Jesus**"--God has "taken up permanent residence" in "**this** life" and "**this** world." That God has "refused" to take the "**No** answer" of "sin" and "death"; and **instead**, has "replied" with the resounding "Yes" of "resurrection." That--**contrary** to the popular "**dispensational** theology" **of**, for example, the Left Behind novels--we are **not**, now, "living in the **last** days"; but **rather**, in a "brand **new** day." That "things have **never** been"--nor will they "**ever** be the same" **again**--because (as "**the church**" declares): "Christ is **risen**--he risen **indeed**!"

"Change" **is** usually "threatening," **isn't it**? As much as "**any** of us" may "complain" and "commiserate" about "life's **same-ness**"--being "transformed"--which is how "**the Bible**" speaks of "resurrection" (the "**meaning of Easter**"); at least for "**a Christian**": that **can be** quite "**un-settling**." Not **un-like** those "**first** Disciples"--we, **too**, likely find the "truth" and "power" of the "**Christian** Easter," at least, more "frightening" than the mere "**ordin-ari-ness**" (or even "**disap-point-ment**") of "a life" **we** have come to "know" and "expect" **all too well**.

The "witness of **Christian** faith," however--at least when you "read **the Bible**"--it is that "**all of life**" has been "transformed" **in** and **thru** and **by** "the resurrection of **Jesus**" (our "**Christian** celebration of **Easter**"). **Such that**--when we "read the Book of **Acts**"--those "**fearful, frightened** Disciples" (whom we meet, in "the **Gospels**," on "**this** side" of an "**empty tomb**") **they** have (as "**Peter** declares," in our "**New Testament lesson**" **today**):

they have become “empowered” **by** “the resurrection of Jesus” **to**, in fact, **be** “the resurrected presence **of Christ**” **in** “the **world**” (Christ’s “redeeming, reconciling presence”).

It’s “what it means to be **a Christian**”—ever **since** that “**first Easter**” (that first “**Christian Easter**”). In **fact**, it’s “what it means to be **a Christian**”—for **us**, “as Christians”—**today**. It’s **who** and **what** “the church” is—as **Paul** says it—“the **body of Christ**”; our Lord’s “**resurrected body**.” For “no **longer**” does Jesus “walk this earth” (as he **once did**)—living and loving, serving and giving—as “**one person**.” **Rather**, Christ is “now present”—**in** “the world”—in the lives of “**many people**” (the “**resurrected Christ**”; “the church”; “**followers of Jesus**”; “**Disciples of Christ**”).

As for it being “frightening”—this “**Christian witness**” to **Easter**—I’m reminded of something I once heard the United Methodist Bishop, **Will Willimon**, relate. He said he was “leading a **Bible study**” with a group of “college students.” They were “studying that passage” (**in Matthew 28**)—which “I mentioned” **earlier**—where **Jesus** (following his “resurrection”); where he gives that “great commision” **to** “his Disciples.” **Where**, in fact, Jesus “concludes” that “commision” by **saying**: “And lo, I am **with you always . . .**”

At which—**one** of “the students,” said Dr. Willimon—he **asked**: “Is that a **promise**, or is it a **warning**? ” **Think** about it . . . that nothing **can**—or **will**—ever **be** “the same” **again**. For “Christ is **risen**—he is **risen indeed!**”

Or as “**Peter declares**”—in his “sermon on **Pentecost**” (our “**New Testament** lesson” today, from **Acts 2**)—“**Of this, we bear the witness**,” he says. A “witness” (indeed, a “**Christian witness**”) **to** the “presence of **Jesus**” (**in** “the **world**”)—the “**resurrected Christ**”—living “in and with, for and thru” **us** (as “Christians”; “**followers of Jesus**”; “**Disciples of Christ**”).